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ABSTRACT

This literature review examines the utilization of community needs assessment data in program planning and evaluation efforts at community colleges. The review first defines and looks at the purposes of community needs assessments, noting that while such studies are purported to facilitate the planning and evaluation of credit and non-credit programs, few studies have led to substantial program changes. After discussing the importance of identifying the needs of subgroups within a community in remaining responsive to all area citizens, the review cites studies which examined the needs of special constituencies, such as women, minorities, and the business community. The application of needs assessment findings to college marketing programs designed to recruit and retain students is considered prior to a review of selected works revealing the limited use made of needs assessment data at community colleges and the importance of incorporating such data in the institutional planning process. Next, the review summarizes prevalent problems in current needs assessment practices, including the lack of clear definitions for "need" and "community," poor data collection and interpretation techniques, and reliance upon data gathering systems that are designed to meet legislatively mandated reporting requirements rather than institutional needs. A bibliography concludes the review. (JP)

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ERIC JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

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RESPONDING TO COMMUNITY NEEDS THROUGH COMMUNITY FOLLOW-UP

BY

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Arthur M. Cohen, *Principal Investigator and Director*

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JUNIOR COLLEGE RESOURCE REVIEW

May 1981

Responding to Community Needs Through Community Follow-Up

The junior college concept matured into the community college concept when institutions expanded their primary mission to provide for the educational needs of the community or service area. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the concept of service widened from educational needs to include others.

Identifying Community Needs

Lenning and others (1980) defined need as "a necessary or desirable condition, state, or situation — whether it be an end result that is actuality (met need) or a discrepancy that should be closed between a current or projected actuality and a necessary or highly desirable end result (unmet need) — as judged by a relevant person or group using multiple objective criteria that have been agreed upon." A needs assessment is an objective and systematic method of identifying and analyzing needs to determine whether or not they are being fulfilled.

The purpose of conducting an assessment of needs is to document, assign priorities, and attempt to respond to identified needs. Ahmann (1979) reviewed the state of the art in needs assessment and focused on (1) definition of "need"; (2) performance and treatment of needs; (3) levels of intensity of educational needs; (4) combination of hard and soft data; and (5) on-going needs assessment. Dealing with these issues is paramount to plan programs and to evaluate efforts.

Historically, community needs have been addressed by community and junior colleges through the development of credit programs. More recently, under the aegis of community instructional services, noncredit courses have fulfilled those needs in the expanded areas of citizenship and leisure and recreation. Cohen (1972) prophesized that the idea of having community service offerings on an equal par with other instructional and student services would constitute an almost impossible, futuristic dream. Nine years have passed since he made this remark, and still community instructional services have not made any great strides in that direction. Yet, the needs are regularly identified by community college personnel as vital ones to be addressed by the community-oriented college.

Rarely have results of community needs assessments led to any substantive changes in existing programs and, even more rarely, to the deletion of existing programs. Some institutions maintain programs on paper. However, the college that is truly responsive to its community reviews its programs — credit and noncredit — on a systematic basis and takes action in terms of program and course addition, revision, or deletion.

The assessment of existing programs, stimulated by economic austerity and pressures from state agencies, is a relatively recent arrival. Lack of money has forced institutions to make decisions about priorities and quality (Miller, 1972). Evaluations allow the institution to determine whether or not program offerings are adequate. Similarly, need assessments can be used to determine if curricula are appropriate for students to attain their goals (for example, transferring to an upperdivision university or obtaining employment). Mehallis (1980) developed a model to evaluate existing programs and to gather baseline, task analysis data for the development of new programs.

A needs assessment model for program development (Landry, 1979) allows for a definition of the college mission as well as a search for and evaluation of ideas. From the ideas, a concept for a program curriculum is developed and tested, resources are allocated, and the program demand is estimated. Finally, the program is evaluated.

Accountability to the Community

In order to be accountable, the college must evaluate itself in relationship to its service to the community (Baird, 1977). Gollattscheck (1977) argues that community-based colleges should assign highest priority to continual renewal of their service areas by providing for lifelong learning needs of all community residents. In planning, conducting, and evaluating programs and activities, community-based education should be determined by documented needs of individuals, groups, and community components; should be accessible to all community residents; and should provide competencies and skills for nontraditional learners. Even more important, Gollattscheck believes that the community-based education approach allows the adaptation of instructional methods to specific needs of diverse learners. He suggests that instructional modules with specific outcome objectives affords the flexibility vital for individuals and the community.

Societal factors affect a constituency. According to Raines (1977), effective needs assessment and planning are dependent upon the accurate simulation of the "needing" process of clientele who are divided as idiographic (individual centered) and nomothetic (social centered). Raines applies behavioral transaction patterns to needs assessment techniques, including the task force approaches: Nominal Group Process, Delphi Technique, Transactional Evaluation Model, and the Charette.

Special constituencies may be identified more clearly by means of needs assessment surveys that are targeted to particular groups with specialized needs. For example, studies have been developed to deal with sex role stereotyping (DeVuyst and others, 1978); women (Lyman-Viera and Boggs, 1976); and minorities, such as Mexican-Americans (Garay and Others, 1976).

Traditional-age college students (under 24), faculty and staff, and older (25 and over) reentry adult students were surveyed by Mangano & Corrado (1978) to determine the educational needs of the adult students. In general, faculty and staff perceived adult needs to be more important than did the adults themselves. Reentry adults were interested in weekend and evening classes, registration, credit for life experience,

and vocabulary and math skill improvement. Adult women students were significantly more interested in remedial and supportive services.

The business community was addressed through management interviews and questionnaires to generate information for developing guidelines and recommendations for a marketing plan. The Metropolitan Community College in Minneapolis undertook such an enterprise, appealing to medium-sized companies (250 to 5,000 employees) to develop credibility in skill and competency training and to establish communication channels with business (Stecklein, 1978). Similarly, employers were personally interviewed in Broward County, Florida, to determine their "employee training needs" and the ways the community college could assist them (Mehallis, 1978). This study extended beyond the community employment assessment and included an investigation of incentives given by employers to employees for obtaining additional education.

A community analysis conducted by Weiser (1977) resulted in the determination of community participation rates, student enrollment patterns, and community census information. Weiser is one of the few investigators who actually lists data limitations in the introduction to his findings. Geographical factors (for example, distance to campus) had the most significant impact, whereas family income, age, and outside employment were not factors in a person's decision to attend the college.

Local participation on the boards of trustees resulted in the community's pressuring the college to play an active role in community planning and development (Gianini, 1979). This is one reason why rural institutions often represent constituency needs better than do urban colleges. Gianini suggests that colleges "team up" with local community agencies. This would result in opportunities for community involvement in decision-making, program cooperation with government agencies and industry, and sharing expertise and facilities for common goal achievement. In addition, existing community resources — such as retired senior citizens and community facilities (libraries, museums, and concert halls) — can be tapped by colleges.

Strategies for Addressing Community Needs

Results of assessments concerning the needs and desires of the community can help the college to develop marketing and recruitment strategies. The staff of Prince George's Community College (1977) conceptualized a "marketing process" to assess community and individual needs and to translate them into needed services. In this case, once the service and programs are determined, they are promoted by identifying the most appropriate message; how they are intended; how they are received; and how the college responds to those acting upon the message. The most important delivery system is identified, and instructional modes are developed along with the selection of schedules and locations. Strategies for delivery systems are designed to incorporate the greatest percentage of student retention. Finally, the entire process is evaluated in terms of marketing research. The four components of the marketing strategy plan — service, promotion, delivery, and evaluation — are meant to attract specific subgroups of prospective students and to retain currently enrolled students.

Marketing strategies for adult nonstudents and current students, competition for minority and occupational enrollments, and institutional survival were identified by Keim and others (1978). Surveys of area employers, educators, and college employees were conducted to ascertain perceptions, evaluation of college services, and relationships with the college. The survey response rates were low (13 percent of the employers, 27 percent of the educators, and 30 percent of all college employees). Analyses were conducted to determine whether the respondents were representative of the nonrespondents, and recommendations were made concerning marketing strategies.

Community Follow-Up

There is a lack of information regarding uses of data for making decisions within the colleges. Wetzel (1977) attempted to make faculty and staff aware of uses of survey data on decision making based upon the Texas Education Agency's Student Information System (Tex-SIS). In many cases, the information is used only for state-mandated reports in the format of comparable data. This format is primarily for the convenience of the state data-keepers rather than for use by faculty and staff. Texas, however, is a front runner among the other states in attempting to obtain meaningful follow up data about former students.

The need to integrate student follow-up into the institutional planning process was put forth by Bers (1980). His interim report included a discussion of the typical low response rate to such studies, the inappropriateness of goal and performance indicators used with nontraditional students, and the lack of commitment on the part of college personnel. As a result, these types of studies have a very small impact upon institutional planning.

Beyond student follow-up should be a follow up of the extent to which community needs have been fulfilled. While the methodology for taking such an approach is yet unclear, strategies could be adopted for needs assessments and student follow-up studies. Along this vein, after summarizing over 600 articles and reports, O'Reilly and Asche (1979) focused on synthesizing methodologies concerning sampling techniques, nonrespondent procedures, and comparative approaches. These techniques are unique for researchers conducting such studies.

Studying the state of the art in needs assessment, Cross (1979) found that only a third of the studies she reviewed had ended with the effective use of results. Furthermore, certain conclusions are predictable from any needs assessment. For example, because they have been replicated so often, the level of educational attainment is a positive predictor of interest and participation in further education; interest and participation drop sharply after age 55; and the respondents' opinions are shaped by their curriculum perceptions.

Data uses are governed by certain conditions. Among these, according to Lee (1979) are availability, reliability, credibility, utility, and consistency. The perspective from which data are gathered has an impact upon how educational needs of adults are categorized. Smith and Dowling (1978) employ Knowles' (1975) basic references of perspective as perceived by learners and professionals; as prescribed by employers, licensing boards, professional associations, and legislative bodies; and as desired by the clientele being served. Besides fulfilling requirements of the law, the assessments can be categorized as consumer demand analysis, problem identification and resolution, and policy priority setting (Varenais, 1977). Unfortunately most assessments are undertaken to fulfill a legislated mandate and are very infrequently used to bring about positive change in the educational system.

Conclusion

While many institutions conduct needs assessment studies of their identified service areas, relatively few are exemplary in terms of either their research techniques or the actual utilization of results. The initial problem is with the clear definition of the terms "need" and "community," and with

the understanding of the concept of need as it is translated into the objectives and scope of a needs assessment study. There is a tendency to overlook existing data and to charge forth to create new data. In cases where existing data are used, there often is no assessment of the accuracy and appropriateness of such data. Characteristics of target groups are not well defined so that they could be used in formulating a research design to elicit the best possible response.

Poor sampling techniques, low response rates, and lack of appropriate interpretation of results contribute to misinformation from needs assessments. Both the community and the educators should be involved in interpreting data and implementing recommendations. Information collected in the assessments should be used to identify real needs and then to establish realistic college goals to meet those needs. Instead, the literature shows innumerable cases where the formal assessment of needs is conducted afterwards in order to substantiate an already formulated goal. Such an approach can do nothing but produce biased results.

What are the real community needs, and how can the two-year college respond to them? Legislators have imposed these questions upon the institutions and, as a result, the community college systems have developed reporting formats that are conducive to their reporting needs and not to the internal college and community needs. The focus must change so that emphasis is placed on the utilization of data as an integral part of the ongoing decision-making process of the institution. Limitations of the data must be understood and considered along with information from secondary sources. Major changes should never be initiated on the basis of a single point of reference. However, that single piece of evidence may trigger further investigation into resolving the matter.

Process needs and content needs must both be determined and translated into some form of action. Data collectors and researchers should develop more appropriate methodologies for determining intangible needs, especially in the liberal arts, general education disciplines. The needs should be assigned priority, and strategies should be developed to address them. The final step before recycling the entire process must be a follow-up evaluation in the community. The community college must decide if it exists to act as a mini-university alone or if its scope is truly to provide both service to the community through accountability and commitment to resolving the needs of its local constituencies.

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Arthur M. Cohen, *Principal Investigator and Director*

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